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ABSTRACT

Noting that new approaches must be found to decrease the numbers of inmates returning to United States prisons and to provide means for productive changes that will result in self-improvement and new options for inmates both inside and outside the prison after their release, a drama program was established in 1979 for inmates at the Federal Correctional Institution in Englewood, Colorado. The program at the medium security prison for adult males was sponsored by the prison chaplain and the recreation director and conducted by four outside volunteers once a week for three hours. Although some problems arose initially, most were overcome during the two and a half years the program existed. The program's benefits included teaching such communication behaviors and skills as role theory, credibility, and linguistic codes. Although the program is designed to benefit inmates, there were additional positive results for the prison administration, society, and communication researchers. (DF)

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Report of a Therapeutic Drama Program in a Federal Prison Implications for Applied Communication

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Report of a Therapeutic Drama Program
in a Federal Prison:
Implications for Applied Communication

That the prison system in the United States is failing to serve society in a productive way has become increasingly clear. The prisons in this country are bursting their seams. Thirty-nine states are under court order to reduce the crowding in their prisons.[1] New facilities are being constructed or existing ones being enlarged in forty-four states, as well as the District of Columbia and the Federal Bureau of Prisons. In the six-year period from 1975 to 1981, the number of prisoners confined in state and Federal prisons increased by fifty-two percent. The incarceration rate increased sixty-three percent over the nine-year period from 1972 to 1981.[2] A very large number of these prisoners are returning prisoners. Sutherland and Cressey report a fifty-percent rate of recidivism,[3] while other reports vary from thirty percent to eighty percent.[4]

New approaches must be made to decrease the numbers of returning inmates and to provide means for productive change that will result in self-improvement and new options for inmates both inside the prison and after their release. There are many approaches offering

partial solutions to these needs. One such approach in the field of speech communication is the use of drama. This paper is concerned with explicating a 2½-year application of communication principles in a prison setting through the medium of drama. Drama serves as an excellent tool--particularly in a prison setting--for teaching communication behaviors and skills that promote self-improvement. "The most desirable speech communication . . . is that which enables an individual to actualize his potentialities more fully so that through self-improvement he can improve the human condition."[5]

Program History

In 1979, at the Federal Correctional Institution (FCI) in Englewood, Colorado, a small drama program was established for the inmates. At that time, the institution was a medium-security prison for adult males. The program was sponsored jointly by the Chaplain and the Recreation Director, each with his own vision of its usefulness--the Chaplain saw it as a religious tool, and the Recreation Director saw it as a therapeutic tool. When I became involved with the program later that year, I was intrigued with the possibilities I saw for drama to be used as a communication tool.

The basic purpose of the program was the production of dramatic presentations by the inmates. Any

inmate who wished to do so could participate--there were no prerequisite qualifications. There were four volunteers from the "outside" conducting the program, which was held one evening per week, ostensibly from six to nine o'clock. (Often, however, it took thirty to forty minutes to go through the admission procedures, drastically cutting our already limited time.) Thus, to prepare and rehearse a one-act play often took months.

Since there were more participants than there were characters in any play we were producing, all the men who did not have acting parts spent the rehearsal time in another room with two of the volunteers learning basic communication and acting skills. Most of the inmates who participated had poor communication skills and virtually no dramatic experience. In spite of this, they ended up producing some excellent college-level, one-act plays.

All performances were held in the prison auditorium in front of the rest of the inmate population. Additionally, people from the outside community were invited in--friends and relatives of the inmates and volunteers, local professional theater people, city and state officials and politicians, and local television and other news-media representatives. The

excitement level was extremely high, although the inmates tried hard to hide their nervousness and fear.

Inmates are not a consistent and stable population; they frequently are transferred without much prior notice, and they are put in "the hole," or solitary confinement, for any of a number of infractions. More than once, we lost a star performer a day or two before the curtain went up.

The program continued for 2½ years. During that time, eight plays were produced and performed. Additionally, plans were made and approved for expanding the program in such a way that inmates could leave the institution and perform in the community. This had not yet come to fruition when we discontinued the program. We terminated the program when FCI was redesignated as a Federal Youth Act facility, and all the adult inmates were transferred to other institutions.

Problems

In any organizational intervention, there are many obstacles to overcome. Conducting a program in a prison is a particularly challenging endeavor, and some unique problems arose. One problem was that ours was a volunteer program--we were not paid for our services--and this caused some credibility problems. Since we

were not being paid, there was a great deal of distrust of and speculation about our motivations for being there.

A problem of particular importance in the prison setting is that of the relationship among the administration, the guards, and the outside program volunteers. The administration did not solicit programs and, in fact, was very selective about approving requests presented for acceptance. There was, therefore, very little interaction with and support for the program from the administration. The guards basically seemed to feel that programs are a waste of time and energy, not to mention the extra problems caused for them in terms of security, and there was a general level of hostility toward outside volunteers.

Because this program was a long-term intervention, we were able to overcome many of the problems with which we were confronted. Through the consistency of the program, the motivations of the volunteers became more clear, and trust developed between the inmates and the volunteers. The inmates, in order not to miss being able to perform, also became more conscientious about avoiding behaviors resulting in punitive actions that would keep them from performing in the plays. Our consistency as volunteers also gained us some respect and support from the administration.

Drama as a Communication Tool

In the remainder of this paper, I will present an explication of drama as a viable communication intervention and will point out some of the many benefits that accrue from such a program--for the inmates, the administration, society at large, and communication scholars and researchers.

There are many areas in which drama, particularly in a setting such as a prison, serves as an excellent tool for teaching communication behaviors and skills, including such concepts as role theory, credibility, and linguistic codes.

Role theory. There is considerable agreement about the importance of role theory to speech communication. Evidence suggests a correspondence between role-taking skills and human communication skills. Dance and Larson define some of the pertinent role theory terms.

> Role itself does not determine how a person in a given situation will fulfill the role expectations, or the way in which other members of the group expect him to behave if he is to fill the role satisfactorily. A person's behavior in acting out a role may be called either role enactment or role performance. The manner in which he fulfills more

than one role determines his role versatility. The way in which he moves from one role to another is labeled role transition. The number of roles he can enact or perform constitutes his role repertoire or role repertory.[6]

A confusion of role and person can lead to breakdowns in communication and also can lead to role rigidity. When guards and inmates continually treat each other as a "role" rather than as a "person," there is little chance for personal communication to take place--the communication process breaks down. Treating one another as roles allows more negative behavior and treatment of one another to occur.

The roles people play affect their behavior and their view of themselves.[7] In a prison, role expectations are very strong. There are codes of conduct among inmates that, if not adhered to, can lead to negative consequences; severe repercussions also can occur for inmates who do not adhere to the role expectations of the authorities. Roles that may be acceptable in the outside world are no longer appropriate. Because of these role expectations, role rigidity occurs--inmates become the role they play and are unable to move easily from role to role. For example, an inmate who plays the role

of a "tough guy" must behave in a way that makes him seem convincing in that role. If he plays the tough guy for a long period of time, he may begin to believe in and see himself as being the role he has been playing. The restrictions of role repertoire for inmates causes them to cease either being able to see or willing to try appropriate options for their role behavior.

The very nature of drama, however, is role taking, and for inmates it is safe role taking; they suffer no reprisals for their behavior as actors in a play. There is freedom to experiment with new behaviors. In this freedom, inmates learn an awareness of the existence of roles. They are able to see through different eyes the behavior and response inherent in different role options.

Since the spectrum of roles they are asked to perform spans a broad range, inmates benefit by beginning to see many new options and perspectives. Often an inmate will ask why he is being directed to perform a role in a certain way: if he were really that person, he asserts, he would behave much differently! This questioning makes explanation of the role possible from a totally different perspective. Benefits occur particularly when the inmate is released, and role taking creates new and better options for productive survival in society. Additionally, since

they are not being told to behave that way themselves, but to behave that way as another character, they find the new behavior easier to perform. Our experience has been that the new role perspectives often become a part of inmates' role repertoires.

Credibility. Another element of speech communication that relates to drama is the notion of credibility. According to Goffman, one thing receivers look for when judging the credibility of a speaker is modal contradiction.[8] One's character and believability are affected positively by what Dance and Larson refer to as "cross-modal support."[9] The reinforcement of one mode--such as the oral mode or the visual mode--by a number of other modalities enhances the credibility of the speaker. For example, if an inmate is accused of some misbehavior of which he is not guilty, and he says he is not guilty while shifting his eyes, fidgeting, and turning red in the face, his credibility is negatively affected because there is no cross-modal support.

Drama is a natural tool for the teaching of credibility through cross-modal support, since they are essential elements of the believability of a performer. Drama teaches the importance of combining role with credibility to form a unity of character.

Inmates generally seem to believe they are credible and invest a great deal of energy in the notion that they are. Because of this investment, they often resist the directness of being told they are not believable. In a dramatic situation, however, the learning is indirect and nonthreatening, and the issue of credibility can be addressed through the inmate as a performer or character in a play, rather than the inmate as himself.

Linguistic codes. The relationship between regulation of one's own behavior and elaborated and restricted linguistic codes also can be used in a prison drama program. According to Dance and Larson, one of the functions of speech communication is the regulation of behavior. "When speech communication is taking place, behavior is being regulated: either the behavior of others or of oneself."[10] Regulation of behavior is related to elaborated and restricted linguistic codes.[11] Bernstein indicates that restricted codes often characterize closed communities like prisons, criminal subcultures, and the military. In these communities, social relations are based on common assumptions and shared identifications of speakers, so that extended verbal communication is often unnecessary. As a result, individuals in these communities often do not learn or have access to more elaborated codes.[12]

Trenholm's research suggests that elaboration of language code is positively associated with the tendency to choose non-aggressive interpersonal tactics in the resolution of peer conflicts. In her study, a greater proportion of elaborated-code users tended to choose non-aggressive tactics, while a greater proportion of restricted-code users tended to choose aggressive tactics.[13] Inmates clearly have chosen aggressive tactics as an attempt to deal with their conflicts with society. Once again, drama is a useful tool for the dilemma presented here. An inmate who learns a dramatic role that is linguistically complicated or elaborated, and learns it in a way that is complete and convincing, begins to take on some of the linguistic code of the character he is portraying. Thus, he is able to talk to himself in such a way as to gain some control to regulate his behavior in a more productive way. As Dance and Larson explain:

> Unless one can verbalize his convictions, assumptions, desires, goals, and drives, it is almost impossible to measure their realization or to program oneself to enhance the opportunities and possibilities for their realization.[14]

Inmates are benefited by their increased ability to

verbalize in such a way. In essence, what drama accomplishes for an inmate population is to extend their world views on these different dimensions, thus expanding their freedom.

Benefits of the Program

In an innovational communication intervention such as this prison drama program, there are benefits that accrue not only for the inmates but also for the administrators of the prison organization, for society at large, and for communication researchers.

Inmates. There are other benefits, not mentioned previously, that accrue to inmates from the drama program. Drama provides an opportunity for productive physical venting and release that results in a lessening of tension and friction. Inmates learn to be directed without feeling resentment, and they learn skills for working in groups. Often, inmates see taking on responsibility in a prison as benefiting only the authorities. In a drama program, they learn to take a great deal of responsibility and begin to see how it benefits them.

Survival in a prison often requires that inmates keep a firm control over their emotions. Emotions that are kept in close check can erupt at inopportune times in painful ways. Drama provides a means for inmates to

express emotions detached from their own actions, thereby gaining the benefits of emotional release without suffering painful consequences.

One of the biggest benefits that occurs from such a program is the increase in self-esteem of the inmates that perform and receive positive feedback and rewards from the audience. This increase in self-esteem affects and is reflected in other aspects of their lives.

Prison administration. For the administration, there are a number of benefits, both inside and outside the institution. The inmates' increased self-esteem carries over into other areas and is reflected in positive changes in their behavior. Also, the releasing of tensions through drama lessens inmate friction and results in a decrease in disciplinary problems. Additionally, the responsibility and creativity of the inmates carries over into other areas of prison life. From an external perspective as well, the program benefited the administration. It was not a costly program, yet bringing in people from the community for performances reflected favorably on the administration.

Society. Although we cannot generalize about reduced recidivism rates as a result of our program, the fact that eighty percent of inmates are released back into society should be kept in mind. Any program that helps

them learn behaviors that will be productive for their return to society is a benefit to that society.

Although our program was not one of them, there are drama programs, such as the one from the New Mexico State Penitentiary, that have an outreach program into the community for young people who might be headed in the direction of prison, reaching them before they have taken that last, irrevocable step. This, of course, would constitute an additional benefit for society.

Communication researchers. One of the cries that is raised against researchers in almost every discipline is that the knowledge and expertise gained from research studies are not used to benefit society. Here, then, is an opportunity for concrete application of our communication knowledge, skills, and tools. The theoretical concepts covered in this paper--role theory, credibility, and linguistic codes--are but a beginning. Other directions that could be taken include interpersonal theories, small group theories, and rhetorical analysis.

Notes

[1] Mark Hatfield, "Approach to Prisons Should be Changed," Rocky Mountain News, 1 February 1983, p. 39.

[2] Dale E. Smith, "Crowding and Confinement," in The Pains of Imprisonment, ed. Robert Johnson and Hans Toch (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1982), pp. 45-46.

[3] E. H. Sutherland and D. R. Cressey, Principles of Criminology (Chicago: Lippencott, 1960), p. 418.

[4] W. R. Arnold, "A Functional Explanation of Recidivism," Journal of Criminal Law, Criminology, and Police Science, 56 (1965), 212.

[5] Frank E. X. Dance and Carl E. Larson, Speech Communication: Concepts and Behavior (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972), p. 173.

[6] Dance and Larson, p. 111.

[7] Dance and Larson, pp. 110-11.

[8] Erving Goffman, The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life (New York: Doubleday, 1959).

[9] Dance and Larson, p. 102.

[10] Dance and Larson, p. 85.

[11] A brief synopsis of Bernstein's elaborated and restricted codes is included in Frank E. X. Dance and Carl E. Larson, The Functions of Human Communication: A Theoretical Approach (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1976), p. 117. "Among the characteristics of

an elaborated code are: (1) grammatically complex sentence structures; (2) frequent use of prepositions that indicate logical relationships, as well as prepositions that indicate temporal and spatial contiguity; (3) explicit individual qualifications; (4) use of a complex conceptual hierarchy for the organization of experience.

[12] Basil Bernstein, "Elaborated and Restricted Codes: Their Social Origins and Some Consequences," in "The Ethnography of Communication," American Anthropologist Special Publications, ed. J. J. Gumperz and Dell Hymes, 66 (1964) 55-69.

[13] Sarah Trenholm, "Language and Aggression: Implications of Language Code Usage for Resolution of Interpersonal Peer Conflicts," Diss. Univ. of Denver 1973, p. 2. Another relevant study, although not specifically related to linguistic codes, was done by Philip Zimbardo involving shyness. (Public speech, Univ. of Denver, Spring, 1983). He discovered that murderers who had never had prior contact with the law until they killed someone were shy and also lacked the communication skills necessary to negotiate successfully through a crisis. When they were confronted with a traumatic life situation that required communication skills for interpersonal negotiation of a settlement

or resolution, they were unable to manage the process and ended up killing the other person.

[14] Dance and Larson, Speech Communication, p. 54.